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Who is in Your Classroom Library? An Exploration of Early Childhood Educators' Usage of Multicultural Literature in the Classroom

Camille Holts

Abstract

In 2018 it was reported that 27% of children's books published were about animals, trucks, and other objects and that 50% were based around white characters. This left room for only 1% of published books to be focused on American Indians/First Nations, 5% on Latinx, 7% on Asian Pacific Islanders/Asian Pacific Americans, and 10% on African/American characters (University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2019). These statistics are alarming considering that books are the cornerstone of our children's early education. Young children learn through what they see and what is read to them. Through the reading experience, children can learn about multiculturalism and people of color. The first step to ensuring that children are exposed to quality literature representing diverse characters is a teacher who is knowledgeable and trained to recognize culturally appropriate literature.

It is common for early childhood educators to be trained for their work through various workshops. This research study consisted of 18 participants who were teachers at an early childhood education center in Southeastern Massachusetts who participated in a multicultural literature training. The study consisted of pre-training and post-training surveys, participant interviews, and classroom observations. Data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed for emerging themes and links to the literature. This research project gives much needed insight as to how teachers can be effectively educated, as well as the relationship between a teacher's experience and their understanding of how to identify and use multicultural literature in an early childhood classroom.

Introduction

Children's books and reading are the cornerstone of early childhood education. This is due to the fact that many teachers in this field use children's books to support their curriculum and lesson plans. It is through children's books that early reading skills, science, math, and social studies are taught. Children's books such as *Thank You, Omu!* (Mora, 2018), *My Name is Sangoel* (Mohammed & Williams, 2009) and *Alma and How She Got Her Name* (Martinez-Neal, 2018) also introduce concepts such as community helpers,

friendships, and all about me, which are common curriculum topics in early childhood education. In addition to this, such literature teaches early reading skills including letter sounds, picture cues, sequencing, and vocabulary. The content of these books becomes the very foundation of a child's education. Along with the vital importance of the use of children's books in the classroom, it is imperative to understand that many children's books are focused around white characters and animals. However, children need exposure to multicultural literature, specifically literature that represents people of color. Early childhood educators need to understand how to appropriately use multicultural literature in the classroom, and why it is important to use such texts. The purpose of this study is to understand how in-service early childhood educators can come to be effectively trained on how to analyze and utilize multicultural literature in the classroom.

In order to gain an evidence-based understanding as to why it is important to utilize multicultural literature in the classroom, the researcher read various peer-reviewed articles to gain a deeper understanding. The articles read varied from studies based on the presence of multicultural literature available in classrooms in various early childhood

centers, to descriptions of the effects of the use of multicultural literature on students in the classroom, as well as studies based on teacher knowledge of multicultural literature. Brinson (2012) looked at the knowledge of multicultural literature amongst early childhood teachers. It is also discussed in Brinson's study the importance of having text that allows for mirrors and windows in the classroom. Although it is important for teachers to incorporate multicultural literature in their curriculum and libraries, they must do it in a way that is authentic (D'Angelo & Dixey, 2001). Adam and Harper assert that using multicultural literature only during holidays and special months, is considered to be the exotic approach, and this should not be the focus in the classroom (2016). Furthermore, the teacher should ensure that the illustrations are historically accurate and appropriate (Ali, Begum, Carter, & Purnell, 2007). Finally, the researcher read articles that looked at the availability of multicultural books in childcare centers, and common themes amongst the books (Bingham et al., 2016). The articles outlined supported the researcher's study to help assert the idea that multicultural literature should be used by educators in the early childhood classroom, and the positive effects of using such literature with students.

Methods

Procedure

The research methods consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. First, quantitative data was collected through pre-training surveys. The pre-training survey asked participants a series of questions to give the researcher insight into their teaching backgrounds and current knowledge. The researcher then facilitated a professional development workshop that educated in-service early childhood educators on how to analyze and utilize high-quality multicultural children's literature in the classroom. The workshop lasted approximately an hour and a half. Teachers had the opportunity to review high-quality multicultural children's books as well. Six weeks after the training, teachers were given a post-training survey that served as a means for the researcher to assess if any information was retained from the training workshop, and if there was a growth in knowledge. During the six weeks between the workshop facilitations and post-training surveys, the researcher conducted classroom observations. In the time of the classroom observations, the researcher was looking for evidence of teachers using multicultural books in the classroom, as well as the multicultural book availability for the children. After the post-

surveys were collected, eight recorded participant interviews were conducted. The interviews served as qualitative data collection and assisted the researcher in gaining insight as to how teachers have been utilizing the multicultural books in their classrooms. Teachers also gave examples of recommendations that they would give another teacher if they were to utilize the books in the classroom, and their sentiments about the usage of multicultural literature. After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher then coded for emerging themes and themes linked to the literature.

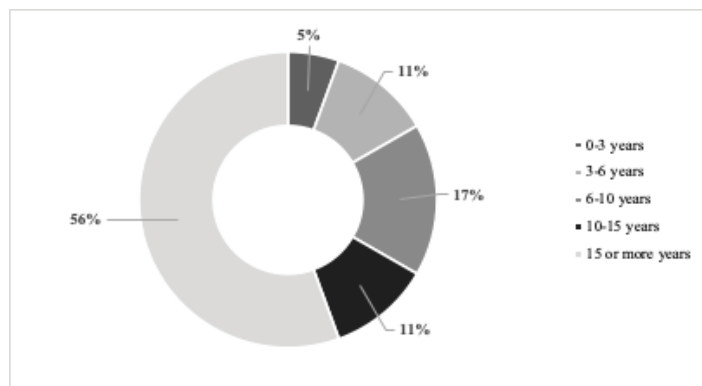
Participants

The research was conducted at an early childhood educational facility in Southeastern, MA. 89% of the participant pool identified as white, and the teacher population at the center is predominantly white as well. All of the participants identify as female, and over half of the pool has been an educator for 15 years or longer. The center serves children ranging from infants through school age. The research site also serves a predominantly white student population. The participant pool included teachers that work in infant, toddler, young preschool, preschool, and older preschool classrooms. Figure 1 displays the

percentages for years of teaching experience for the participants.

Figure 1

Years of Teaching Experience



Limitations

Place of Work

The first limitation is that the research was conducted at the researcher's place of work. This allowed the researcher to have an existing established relationship with the participants. However, due to this pre-existing knowledge, the researcher was able to understand various teachers' pedagogies, beliefs, and possible pre-existing notions about multicultural literature in the classroom.

Researcher Race Identification

The second limitation was that the researcher racially identifies as black. The researcher believes that

the participants were not completely honest during individual qualitative interviews. This is due to the fact that the participants seemed to be hesitant, as to not offend the researcher, when answering questions in relation to the use of multicultural children's literature.

Research Study Site

Another limitation of the study is that it was conducted at one research site with only 18 participants.

The research would have been enhanced if it was conducted at various early childhood education centers throughout Massachusetts. In an ideal research situation, the research sites would have been comprised of centers in different towns, with varying teacher and child populations, as well as at centers that reflected the original center in which the research study took place.

Researcher's Bias

Finally, the research study was limited due to the researcher's stance on multicultural literature. The researcher believes that multicultural literature should be used regularly in the classroom and be made available to students in the classroom. Additionally, the researcher also thinks that multicultural literature is a useful tool for the classroom because it can give

children access to literature that positively reflects themselves and allows for insight into other's lives that may not be similar to theirs.

Results

The researcher conducted pre-training and post-training surveys to collect quantitative data. The researcher was most interested in understanding the pre-knowledge that the participants had in relation to analyzing and utilizing multicultural literature, as well as their knowledge of multicultural literature examples. The researcher then had participants complete a post-training survey to see if there was any information retention and growth after the facilitation of the professional development workshop. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed and coded for emerging themes and themes linked to the literature. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to observe evidence of multicultural books in the classroom. The data collected during the study was triangulated through quantitative, qualitative, and classroom observations collections.

Pre-Training Quantitative Data

The pre-training quantitative data revealed that 75% of

participants indicated that they use multicultural books in the classroom, and that 82% of the total number of participants choose books that are representative of the school's population. The most pertinent information from the pre-training data included participants' experience with multicultural books and how they analyze the literature. The data showed that approximately 83% of participants had never been trained in multicultural literature before. Figure 2 shows the likelihood of participants analyzing a potential multicultural literature text prior to using it; 24% of participants indicated that they would never analyze, 59% indicated sometimes, and 18% indicated always. In connection to this data, it is important to note that 73% of participants indicated they would not know what to look for when analyzing multicultural children's books, and only 27% indicated that they did know what to analyze for. Participants were asked to give three examples of what they would look for when analyzing multicultural children's books. Examples of participant responses included looking at portrayals, traditions, and language. All 18 participants were also asked to list five examples of a multicultural book, resulting in a possibility for 90 multicultural book example responses. However, the post-training data results show that out of the 90 possible responses,

there were 11 responses, resulting in an approximate 12% response rate. Figure 3 displays the percentages of teacher participants that have participated in some form of multicultural literature training prior to this study and training workshops, with 84% indicating that they had never participated in such training.

Figure 2
Participants Who Analyze Multicultural Books Prior to Use

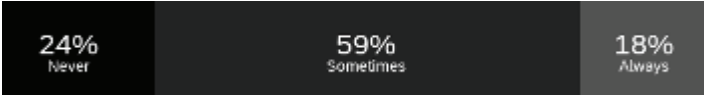
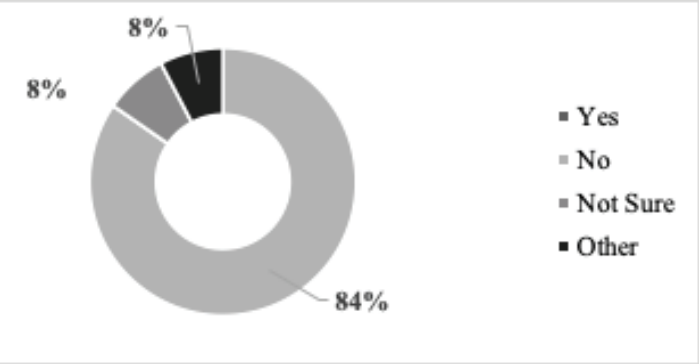


Figure 3
Multicultural Literature Training Experience

Post-Training Qualitative Data Results

Participants were again asked to give five examples of multicultural children’s books. The post-training data results showed that participants were able to give 46 book examples, increasing the response rate from approximately 12% to 51%. The results demonstrated

growth in the ability to identify examples of quality multicultural children’s books. The survey also



served as a means for the researcher to analyze what information from the training was retained by the participants. According to the responses given by the participants, 19% of responses were related to analyzing books for illustration accuracy, 13% knowledgeable/credible author, 11% accurate/stereotype-free language and 2% effects on a child’s self-image. The post-training data demonstrated knowledge growth amongst the participants; they were able to recall information different from the pre-training responses.

Emerging Qualitative Data Results

The emerging qualitative data results were collected through semi-structured interviews. Four emerging themes found from the interviews were teacher training, teacher responsibility, self-blame, and urgency to include multicultural books.

Teacher training. While answering the interview questions, two participants mentioned topics related to teacher training. They both noted that when completing professional development workshops in the past, they had never completed one related to multicultural children's literature. Participant A went on to describe that they had never seen any trainings related to multicultural literature at all. However, both participants said they have completed social-emotional related workshops. It was also noted by participant B that they have completed workshops related to STEM, natural science, and gross motor topics. Participant B also noted that they have been to both in-person and online trainings, but finds in-person trainings to be more useful for learning purposes.

Interviewer: ...when you do workshops for professional development, what topics do you usually look at?

Participant A: I do...like to go to social-emotional ones, yeah. Mostly that's what I go to. I've never seen one offered for, to go on, anything about multicultural curriculum or anything like that.

Participant B: Natural science, gross motor, STEM activities, how to better myself communication wise with other teachers...

Teacher responsibility. It was explained by a participant that when it came to inclusion in the classroom, racial inclusion did not mean including multicultural books. In their work experience, racial inclusion and multiculturalism meant having racially diverse baby dolls and toys in the classroom available for the children to use. However, two different participants described that they are not at all responsible for choosing books for the classroom. Participant C, who is a substitute teacher for the school, indicated that they do not have any responsibility for choosing books in the classroom or curriculum. Additionally, participant D expressed that there is one person, different from them, who is tasked with choosing books for the entire classroom and the teachers in it. It is important to note that at the research site, each classroom has at least more than one teacher.

Interviewer: How do you incorporate multicultural children's literature in your daily curriculum plans? Can you give me two examples?

Participant C: It doesn't really apply to me because I'm a float [substitute teacher], so.

Participant D: [Teacher's Name] is the one in charge of the library, so she does the book rotation.

Self-blame. During the interview, participant A demonstrated sentiments of self-blame. They wondered why they had not thought of including multicultural literature in their curriculum and classrooms before. They appeared to come to understand the importance of utilizing multicultural literature in the classroom. However, they acknowledged that they failed to incorporate such literature throughout their years of teaching in the early childhood setting.

Interviewer: Why do you think multicultural children's literature hasn't been touched upon that much?

Participant A: Why didn't I think of it even sooner to have those kind, you know, everything like that in the classroom? Why haven't the teachers that have been co-teachers of mine through the years, why didn't we do that, or think of that?...Kind of feel too bad, I kinda feel bad that I'm just hearing that now, you know, toward the end of my career, three years left in my

career, and I'm just, hearing this now.

Urgency to include multicultural books. When asked to give examples of how multicultural literature is used in the classroom by the participants, some of the participants described that they have not included multicultural literature due to repetitive curriculum or the focus of the center. Some participants felt as though the curriculum at the center has gotten repetitive over the years, and that teachers have not made changes or implemented new curriculum. On the other hand, one participant stated that they have not used multicultural literature due to the fact that the center has a natural science focus, so they are not inclined to choose that type of literature. As a result of both cases, participants have not utilized multicultural books in the classroom.

Interviewer: How do you incorporate multicultural children's literature in your daily curriculum plans? Can you give me two examples?

Participant E: I cannot [give two examples of MCB usage in the classroom] that is what we should be focusing a little bit more on because I think we've been doing a lot of the same curriculum books forever, and they're just the ones people pull off.

Participant F: I feel like I don't incorporate multicultural books enough in the curriculum because we're such a natural science-based program here, that we don't go for books like that.

Literature-Linked Qualitative Data Results
Exotic use of multicultural literature. It was revealed by a participant that they have used literature in the classroom that focused on holidays of various cultures. These holidays included, but are not limited to, Las Posadas, Kwanzaa, and Ramadan. Although the researcher did not discuss straying away from only using literature related to multicultural holidays during the training workshop, this type of use should not solely be used in the classroom. It is explained by Andrea M. D'Angelo and Brenda P. Dixey (2001) that this use of multicultural literature in the classroom does not allow children to fully grasp an understanding of multicultural people, and gives the idea that the group of people in the book are only relevant on certain days of the year. Also, the exotic use of multicultural literature does not shed light on to modern living and representations of the ethnic group at hand (Adam & Harper, 2016).

Appropriate illustrations. According to Adam and Harper (2016), when assessing and choosing

multicultural literature books for the classroom, teachers should ensure that their selections include appropriate illustrations. During the interviews, it was apparent that the participants remembered checking the illustrations for appropriateness. When choosing books for their classroom and curriculum plans, participants described that they are looking for illustrations that are accurate and free of stereotypes. One participant indicated that they observed in a book, in which they read to children, that two African American characters were represented with different skin tones. This participant explained that they realized that the characters with different skin tones is a fact of life and is noticing more how characters are illustrated. These correct representations are important for children of color to have exposure to so that they are able to positively see themselves in literature (Brinson, 2012). Also, other participants indicated that they try to make sure the illustrations in the multicultural books are historically accurate. Having historically accurate images of people of color allows for various ethnic groups to be accurately represented (Ali et al., 2007).

“Everyone is different” mindset. Holding the mindset that everyone is different may not be the

key to understanding and incorporating multicultural literature in the classroom. This mindset may be harmful because it places all people from different walks of life into one box. Teachers should shy away from this idea because it does not allow for consideration of cultural authenticity (Adam & Harper, 2016). This mindset was apparent during the participant interviews as some described that when approaching multiculturalism, it is important to stress that everyone is different. Instead, teachers should stress the deeper meaning behind everyone being different, and what can be learned and appreciated from their differences. Doing this allows for students to understand and appreciate the different experiences of those that they are learning about (Adam & Harper, 2016).

Student-to-text connections. Students are able to create connections with the texts they are reading through realistic and believable characters (Adam & Harper, 2016). During the interviews, it was revealed by multiple participants that due to diverse classrooms, they think it is important for the children to be represented in the texts that they are exposed to. Not only are the students who are represented able to create connections, but those

who do not look like the people represented have the ability to create connections as well. Brinson (2012) expressed that children, who are different from those being represented in books, are able to develop an understanding of those of diverse backgrounds. Through the use of multicultural literature in the classroom, teachers are able to create student-to-text connections that vary from identification with characters that represent the students in a classroom, to characters that do not look like some students.

Discussion

Conclusion

The researcher has concluded that the teachers in the study would have benefitted from ongoing training and education in the area of analyzing and utilizing multicultural literature in the classroom. This conclusion is drawn from the point that the participants only had one exposure to a new teaching method. However, if the teachers and participants were continually educated and supported, they would be able to effectively use the information shared. The researcher believes that having only one exposure to analyzing and utilizing multicultural literature in the classroom was not entirely effective. This is evident due to the lack of use and urgency for multicultural

literature. Accountability is also an important factor when educating teachers. The teachers should have been held accountable for their efforts in incorporating multicultural literature into their curriculum and classroom. In relation to this study, the teachers would have benefitted from working closely with the researcher to implement authentic use of multicultural literature. It was expressed during interviews that multicultural books were used during the holiday season. The researcher believes that the participants had positive intentions when including the holiday books in the classroom. However, due to the researcher not wanting to influence the interview, the researcher did not discuss the harms of using multicultural literature in the classroom only during the holiday season. A supportive relationship between the researcher and participants may have been beneficial for the participants to understand what authentic usage looks like, and how they can use such literature on a regular basis.

Recommendations to the Field

This study was comprised of early childhood educators in the early education and care system at a large group and school age center. At minimum, for a teacher to be qualified and licensed by the state, they are required to have one college child development

course, or a high school equivalent. Teachers are also required to have 9 months' work experience with the age group of children they plan to work with (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2019). Currently, once certified, educators are required to complete 20 hours of professional development trainings if they work 20 hours or more per week at a large group and school age center; teachers who work less than 20 hours per week are required to complete 12 hours of professional development (Policy Statement: Professional Development, 2012). The researcher recommends that the state implements more requirements for individuals to become a qualified early childhood educator. Additional requirements would include requiring teachers to take more college level courses to prepare them for educating children. One of these courses should be a literacy course that educates individuals on how to analyze and utilize multicultural literature in the early childhood classroom. Teachers would benefit from this course because the training is ongoing, and they are able to collaborate with their peers and professor. Although this course is important, individuals should also take courses on multiculturalism and diverse classrooms. This would assist teachers in understanding the importance of creating a classroom environment

where every child is accepted, validated, and understood. All early childhood classrooms should be culturally responsive with teachers who are educated in doing this. Another recommendation to the field is to have licensed educators complete trainings that have longevity. Many of the professional development opportunities occur once, such as one online training webinar or one in-person training. However, teachers may benefit from trainings that have more meeting opportunities to allow teachers to reflect, educate, and discuss what they have learned. This will allow for teachers to gain more insight into the subject matter. Finally, teachers should be held accountable for the new material they have learned. Teachers need to show their efforts of using the new information shared during professional development. Accountability for the teachers should be done by the person who has facilitated the training, or some type of mentor or administrator who is knowledgeable in the subject area; teachers should report back to someone with knowledge in the area so that the teachers can genuinely incorporate the new subject matter.

Future Research

In the future, the researcher would conduct the study at various centers throughout Massachusetts. This would allow for the researcher to gain a sense of common

themes throughout the early childhood education system throughout the state. The researcher would also hold the teachers accountable and regularly meet with the participants to assist in the authentic usage of multicultural literature in the classroom. Finally, the researcher wonders if different results would come to light if the research were to be conducted by a white researcher. The researcher is curious to know if a white researcher would have any different impacts on teachers while conducting the study.

Research Reflection

The researcher learned that collaborative professional development workshops can work for in-service teachers. During the workshop, the researcher allowed for teachers and participants to freely ask questions and provide commentary. This allowed for those at the workshop to work in an environment that allows for them to understand other's views and perspectives. The researcher also learned that the semi-structured interviews allowed insight into participant's dispositions and views on multicultural literature in the classroom.

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Appendix A

How to Analyze Children's Literature

Check the Illustrations:

- ☐ Does the material include oversimplified generalizations about a particular group or race that is derogatory? Are minorities shown in subservient ways?

- ☐ Do minority characters look similar to other characters (Ex: Do all characters look alike, but skin is simply tinted?)
- ☐ Do all minorities look stereotypically alike or do they have distinct features?

Check the Story Line:

- ☐ Do characters of color have to demonstrate particular “acceptable” qualities to be successful? Do minority characters have to follow a specific set of standards to be successful?
- ☐ How are problems presented, conceived, and resolved? Are the reasons for such problems explained or considered inevitable? Does the story call for active resistance?
- ☐ Are minority people considered to be the problem?

Look at the Lifestyles:

- ☐ Are minorities living exclusively in ghettos, migrant camps, slums...etc?
- ☐ Do the illustrations offer insight into other cultures and lifestyles?
- ☐ Do characters of color contrast unfavorably with the underlying setting of the story?

Weigh the Relationships Between People:

- ☐ Who is taking the leadership roles and making the decisions?
- ☐ How are families depicted? Ex: In Latino families, are there always lots of children? Are Black mothers always set in dominant roles?

Note the Heroes:

- ☐ Whose interests is a particular hero really serving?
- ☐ How are minority heroes depicted?

Consider the Effects on a Child’s Self-image:

- ☐ Are norms established that limit any child’s aspiration and self-concept?
- ☐ What effect can it have on children of color to be continuously bombarded with images of the color white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, virtue, etc., and the color black as evil, dirty, menacing, etc...?
- ☐ Who is able to identify with the characters in the story?

Consider the Author’s or Illustrator’s Background:

- ☐ What qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with the topic at hand? Ex: If there is a book about the Chinese experience, what would make the author or illustrator qualified to discuss/explain the Chinese experience?
- ☐ If the author and illustrator are not members of the minority being written about, is there anything in their background that would specifically recommend them as the creators of this book?

Check Out the Author’s Perspective:

- ☐ Is the text Eurocentric or are there perspectives from others as well? Such as, but not limited to, minorities, people from different cultural backgrounds, different countries.

Watch for Loaded Words:

- ☐ Does the text have words that have a negative undertone?
- ☐ Are characters described as lazy, primitive, rude, hostile, savage, etc.?

Criteria for Evaluating Multicultural Literature:
<https://www.chil-es.org/10ways.pdf>

Multicultural Children's Books Advocacy Group and Resources: diversebooks.org

Look at the Copyright Date:

- ☐ Books written post 1970s tend to be more "relevant" to the times; meaning the literature tends to be more accurate to the times. However, the text should still be evaluated to be sure it is an acceptable book for children. Just because a book was written after the 1970s, does not necessarily mean it is relevant or accurate.

Multicultural children's books awards:

Coretta Scott King Award: <http://www.ala.org/rt/emiert/cskbookawards>

Pura Belpré Award: <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal>

We Read Too App: A Phone/Tablet Application available for iOS and Android, <https://wereadtoo.launchaco.com/>

Note. This list was adapted by Camille Holts from: California State Department of Education. (2001). *10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism.* California State Department of Education. <https://www.chil-es.org/10ways.pdf>.

This document was created in October 2018 for an early childhood professional development workshop.

Additional Resources

American Library Association: ala.org

An American Book Review Website: kirkusreviews.com

Appendix B

Suggested Multicultural Children's Books

A Chair for My Mother by Vera B. Williams
A Different Pond by Bao Phi
Alma and How She Got Her Name by Juana Martinez-Neal
Besos for Baby by Jen Arena & Blanca Gómez
Cora Cooks Pancit by Dorina K. Lazo Filmore
Dream Big, Little One by Vashti Harrison
Dreamers by Yuyi Morales
Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music by Margarita Engle
For You Are a Kenyan Child by Kelly Cunnane
Funny Bones by Duncan Tonatiuh
Harvesting Hope by Kathleen Krull
Islandborn by Junot Díaz
Julián Is a Mermaid by Jessica Love
La Princesa and the Pea by Susan Middleton Elya
Last Stop on Market Street by Christian Robinson
Let the Children March by Monica Clark-Robinson
Malala's Magic Pencil by Malala Yousafzai
Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match by Monica Brown
Maya Lin: Artist-Architect of Light and Lines by Jeanne Walker Harvey
Mirror by Jeannie Baker
My Name is Yoon by Helen Recortis
Pablo Neruda: Poet of the People by Monica Brown
Thank You, Omu by Oge Mora

Tar Beach by Faith Ringgold

The Nian Monster by Andrea Wang

The Princess and the Warrior by Duncan Tonatiuh

The Word Is Not a Rectangle: A Portrait of Architect Zaha Hadid by Jeanette Winter

Those Shoes by Maribeth Boelts

We are Grateful: Otsaliheliga by Traci Sorell

About the Author

Camille Holts is a graduating senior studying Elementary Education and Spanish. She has aspirations of becoming a classroom teacher in the upcoming 2020-2021 school year. During the summer of 2019, Camille worked closely with Dr. Jeanne Ingle (Elementary and Early Childhood Education) on her research, which was made possible by the Adrian Tinsley Program for Undergraduate Research summer grant. The research study focused on how in-service, early-childhood educators can become effectively educated on analyzing and utilizing multicultural literature in the classroom. Camille is excited to continue her work in the education field and has plans to conduct this research study on a larger scale in the future.